Fortunate Is the Orchid Hunter Who Emerges from the Jungle Alive

George L. Freeman, After Many Thrilling Escapes, Will Again Explore the Heart of South America to Augment the Wonderful Collection of a Philadelphia Enthusiast.

NOT content with possessing the finest collection of orchids in America, if not in the world, Mrs. George B. Wilson, of Philadelphia, is planning to send an expedition to South America to search for rare specimens that have eluded the vigilance of the hunters in the past. Mrs. Wilson has already expended $500,000 in the pursuit of her lifelong hobby, but orchidists, like other wealthy collectors, can never reach the goal of their ambition. While there are rare specimens to be had for the searching, there will be collectors willing to finance expeditions of reckless men who penetrate to the heart of a poisonous wilderness for floral treasures.

With the collection already under glass at her capacious greenhouses in Philadelphia, Mrs. Wilson has an orchid variety that is the envy and wonder of enthusiasts the world over, and lovers of this rare flower come from all countries to examine and admire the specimens.

Unlike some orchid collectors, who are content to cultivate a few plants with a view to obtaining blooms for decorative purposes, Mrs. Wilson has always aimed to secure as many unique and hitherto unknown specimens as possible. With this object in view she equips expeditions to scour the orchid countries and bring to her Philadelphia greenhouses as many rare varieties as can be found. She has commissioned Eugene Andre, of Trinidad, to search the forests of Brazil and Venezuela for plants, and has for years supported private expeditions under the leadership of George Barrault, an intrepid Frenchman, formerly in the employ of Baron Rothschild.

With such enthusiastic research it is not to be wondered at that Mrs. Wilson has a collection second to none in the country. She has acquired as many as twenty thousand specimens. For one of these she recently refused an offer of $2,000. When the collection of Erastus Corning, of Albany, N. Y., was sold at auction after his death, Mrs. Wilson purchased four thousand of the most valuable specimens. As this collection had cost Mr. Corning something like $500,000 to accumulate and had taken thirty years in the gathering, the value of the entire collection in Philadelphia may be imagined.

From the Corning collection Mrs. Wilson secured the wonderful Vanda Tricolor, Vanda Gigantica and Vanda Bethmania, three specimens more than a hundred years old. The Gigantica is known to be more than one hundred and fifty years old. The plants are priceless in the estimation of the present owner. They are the tallest and largest plants under cultivation, all being more than seven and a half feet tall.

The value of such plants as these may be better appreciated when it is known that an orchid takes about two years to appear above the mould as a tiny leaf, half an inch high, and does not acquire the growth of three inches under five years, and frequently does not flower until it is twenty years old. An orchid blooms only once a year. It may throw out two flowers or a cluster of delicately traced blossoms, which remain bright and fresh for a month or six weeks.

One little bifurcated branch of white flowers grown on a Dendrobium phalænopsis album plant is valued at $500. It is a freak, the purple flowering plant of the same species being worth little intrinsically. Single specimens of the exquisite white and yellow Cypripedium from India are valued at $1,000 each. The largest Ainsworth calorum of the Cypripedium family is owned by Mrs. Wilson, and is valued at $10,000.

A rare plant that bears an interesting history is the Cypripedium Fairrieinum. Many years ago this wonderful orchid was discovered by an English collector in India. He brought four of the plants to England, and they caused a sensation there among collectors. The finder was urged to tell where he had discovered this beautiful orchid, but no inducement could make him betray the hiding place of the treasure. All four of the plants he had brought to England died, but the discoverer kept his secret, always intending to go back to India and gather more specimens. Death intervened and the secret of the hiding place of the rare orchid was lost. For more than forty years the search for the plant was kept up assiduously, orchid hunters examining every nook and corner of the country where specimens might be lurking. No one found a single specimen. At last a prize of a thousand pounds ($5,000) was offered by English horticulturalists to any person who might rediscover the variety. Under the stimulus of this reward the waning energies of the hunters became galvanized into renewed activity, and at last, about six years ago, a collector won the prize, finding the plant in the interior of India, near the Burmese border. There are only two specimens in this country. They are priceless. Mrs. Wilson has refused enormous sums for her plant.

The collection of Mexican Laelia orchids owned by Mrs. Wilson is probably the finest in the world. These blooms are of white waxy radiance, growing in clusters on long arching spikes or stems. One greenhouse contains a complete collection of purple Mexican Laelia. In one of the East Indian houses is a specimen of the Phalænopsis, or great white moth orchid, called the "Harrietta." It is the only example of this hybrid plant in existence, and is priceless. There is also a large collection of the East India Vanda orchid. One pink bloom, known as the "Loule," is very rare and difficult to import, as it is found only in the jungles in the interior of the country.

Not the least interesting feature of orchid collecting is the means adopted to obtain these rare specimens. There are few stranger ways of getting a living than by wrestling these plants from the unwholesome regions in which they grow. One of the famous hunters of this country is George L. Freeman. He is about to head an expedition for Mrs. Wilson into the interior of South America, and this story would not be complete without some incidents of his past exploits in the orchid country. He has been in the tropics since he was a boy of fourteen, and has suffered many hardships during his lifelong devotion to the work of hunting the coveted plants.

He has made his way along the Orinoco and the Maita rivers, and in the mountain country of Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil has penetrated regions never before visited by a white man. He has fought off whole tribes of Indians and has reached civilization almost the sole survivor of large expeditions. He characterizes orchid hunting as akin to the search of the explorer for gold. The same hope buoys the hunter up in the face of almost insurmountable difficulties, and, according to Freeman, a like reward awaits success in this novel field of treasure hunting. Here is Freeman's story of some of his adventures:

"It is only up in the mountains that we get valuable plants. The tropical ones are brilliant, but they don't last. I make for an altitude of between 6,000 and 10,000 feet; I find it by taking the temperature, for orchid country does not vary six degrees in the year. We pick out a promising looking ravine and skirt the slopes on the same level, gathering plants as we see them. There is no one place where they grow; sometimes we get them in the densest underbrush and again out on the bare rocks in the sun. Orchids always differ with locality, too, and it is variation that we seek.

"If the person who admires these plants in a greenhouse only knew what it costs to get them! Generally we pack them four or five days on our backs to a mule trail rendezvous and there shift them to the pack animals. A man carries seventy-five pounds of plants, or about five hundred. We have to cut out our wooden cases by hand with saws or machetes and carry nails for them all the way from the coast. We have to hustle back, for on the lower levels we lose plants fast. If we miss the ship it's all over.

"It is not too much to say that the chances are against your coming back alive. Sickness or accident will get you even if you know the ways of the land and how to take care of yourself. Many a time I gave myself up for lost. The Indians are friendly if you make it plain that you are better armed, but I have had plenty of fighting to do. They are not afraid of a shotgun; they can outshoot that with their bows and arrows, but the whistle of a rifle bullet will start them running every time. An Indian can put an arrow through a hat a block away in a second, and a hit means certain death, because the arrows are tipped with poison.

"Once I was up in the mountains with one boy and three mules, and an old man told me that the Indians from down in the Orinoco country were up in arms and raiding the semi-civilized people in the south, just where I had to go. I turned aside and made for the coast along the river instead. Two days I carried my rifle across the pommel, and then I thought I was out of danger and hung it on a pack mule.

"I was riding over the rolling savannah near the bank in front of the boy and the mules. Suddenly a shower of arrows passed me. The Indians had been seen by the boy, who had turned the mules and run for it. The arrows were meant for him. There ensued an interesting chase. I was after the boy and the rifle; the Indians were after us all. The arrows continued to fly, and one scratch would have been enough to settle us. However, it is no easier to shoot an arrow accurately while running at full speed than it is to fire a rifle under the same conditions, and none of the arrows hit us. I yelled at the boy to stop, but he only ran the faster. Luckily, I was on a better mule than he was, and at last ran him down. I got the rifle and pumped as many shots as I could in the direction of the Indians. My rifle and bullets frightened them even more than their arrows did me, and at last they made off. It was several days before I got over that experience.

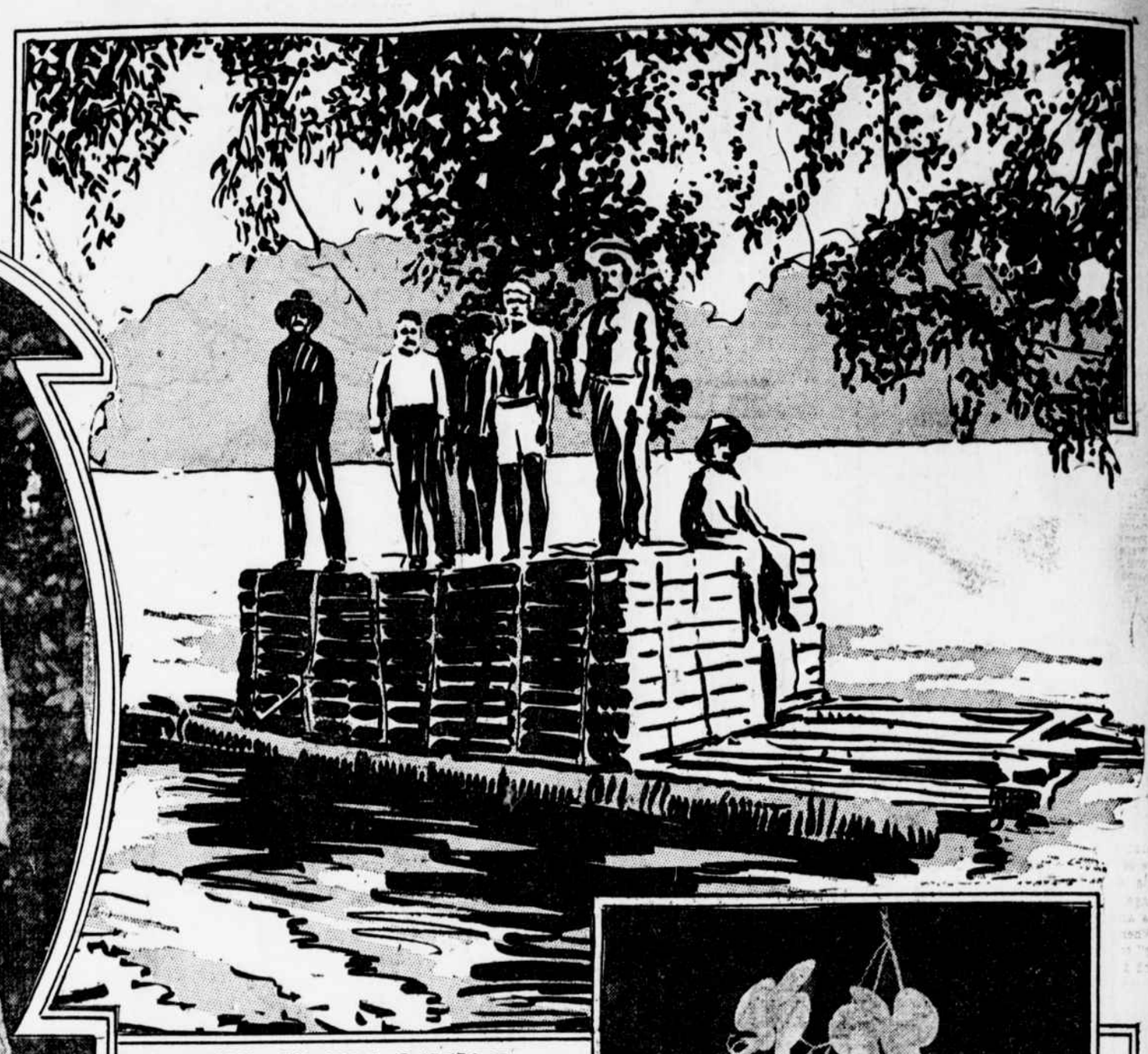
"I fought a sort of naval battle with them on the Muitz River. There was political trouble brewing then, and the rurales were out in all the upper country. I had shifted all my stuff to one of the native canoes, rather than make the trip overland; in those canoes you never go ashore, but just stick a pole in the mud and tie up to it.

"One day a fellow popped his head above the grass on the bank and called to me to come in; he wanted to trade, he said, and he waved a jaguar skin. I answered that I could not come in, but would be at a town ten miles below on the next day. He cursed me in choice native dialect, and at the same instant one of my boys cried out and pointed to a war canoe coming around a turn in the river. All the boys in the boat dropped to the bottom, completely covering my rifle, so that I could not get at it. Then the arrows began to fly, and it seemed an age before I got hold of that gun. I aimed at the boat, and the first shot tore a hole in the frail craft, and it began to fill and sink. The natives made for the shore, and, free from the necessity of dodging arrows, I plugged several of them in the water.

"Some of the minor incidents I can recall are that I have gone over the head of a mule four times in a day, swum in a flooded river and cut away baggage from the mules to save them, and lost both baggage and mules. I've been sick as death itself a thousand miles from any white man, and have been my own surgeon and doctor.

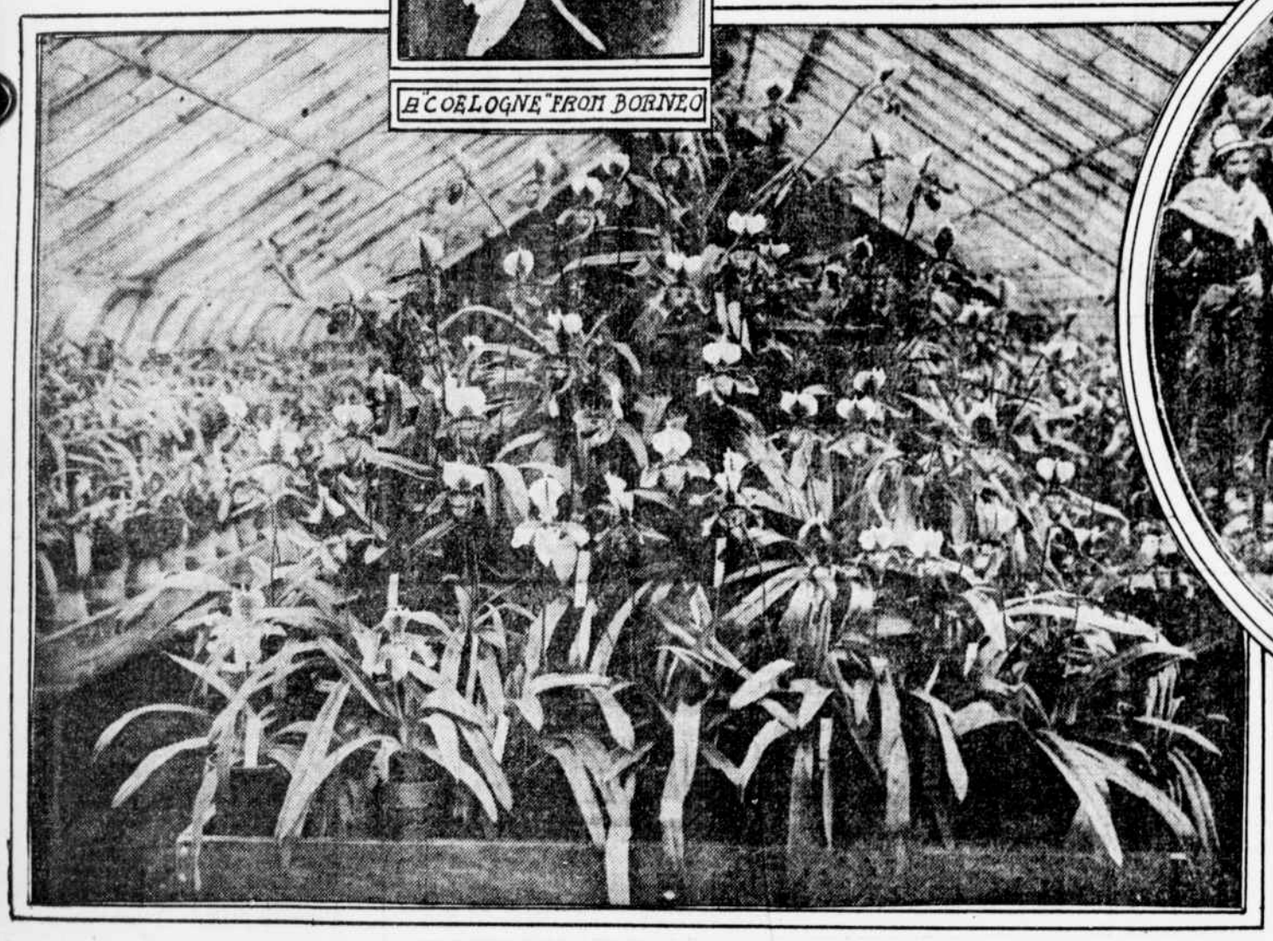
"Everything there is poisonous—Indians, snakes and insects. When you take the trail in the morning, and the ground is still wet from the night mists, the snakes hang down from the trees; it looks as though their mouths gape a foot wide in your face. There's no small snake there that isn't poisonous. You have to look sharp to your clothes for insects. One brown ant, as big as a bumblebee, has a sting that paralyzes you for a day or more. Nature is brilliant there, and vicious, too. A trip after orchids is enough adventure for any man, but I suppose I have gone through no more than any other orchid hunter."

MRS. G.W. WILSON
THE ORCHID QUEEN



FLOATING ORCHIDS DOWN A RIVER IN SOUTH AMERICA.

A "COELOGNE" FROM BORNEO

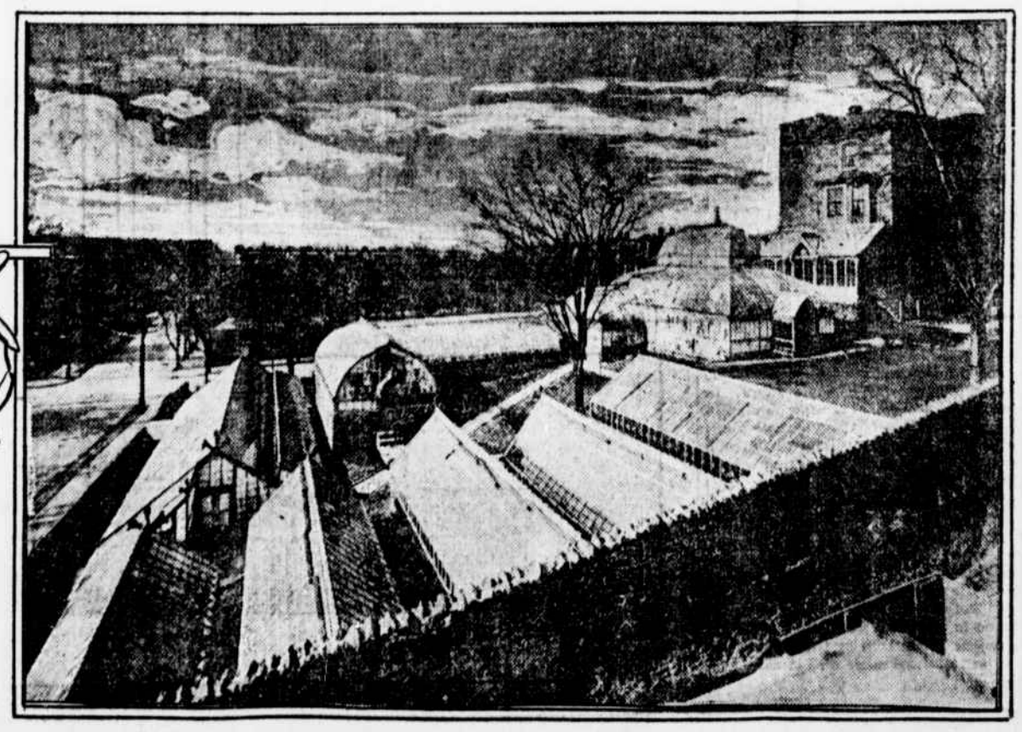


MRS. WILSON'S CYPRIPEDIUMS.
Some of the plants in this group are worth $5,000 each.

AN ORCHID FOR WHICH MRS. WILSON REFUSED $2000.

JEAN DE BUCK, ONE OF MRS. G.W. WILSON'S SOUTH AMERICAN HUNTERS TRAVELLING TO THE COAST WITH A PACK TRAIN OF PLANTS

THE FAMOUS "LOST ORCHID," REFOUND WHEN TIBET WAS FORCED OPEN.



MRS. WILSON'S RESIDENCE AND ORCHID HOUSES IN PHILADELPHIA.

IN PRAISE OF MODESTY.

Reginald De Koven told at a musical in Chicago a pretty story in praise of modesty.

"A group of tourists," he said, "visited in Bonn Beethoven's house. One of the tourists, a girl of twenty or so, sat down at Beethoven's piano and played the 'Moonlight Sonata' none too well—Beethoven's own work, in his own room, on his own piano!

"When the girl had finished she arose and said to the old caretaker:

"'I suppose lots of famous musicians have been here and played on this instrument?'

"'Well, miss,' the caretaker answered gravely, 'Paderewski was here last year, and his friends urged him to play, but he shook his head and said:

"'"No; I am not worthy."'"

CELESTIAL INGENUITY.

"I hope our dear old Dr. Wu Ting-fang is on the right side in these Chinese troubles," said a diplomat at a dinner in Washington.

"Dr. Wu," he continued, "used to tell me many illuminating anecdotes about the Chinese character. I remember one about ingenuity.

"A Chinaman, the anecdote ran, found his wife lying dead in a field one morning; a tiger had killed her.

"The Chinaman went home, procured some arsenic, and, returning to the field, sprinkled it over the corpse.

"The next day the tiger's dead body lay beside the woman's. The Chinaman sold the tiger's skin to a mandarin, and its body to a physician to make fear-cure powders, and with the proceeds he was able to buy a younger wife."

SCOTLAND'S IDOL.

A member of the Lambs told at a dinner in New York a Scotch story.

"A Scotchman and an Irishman," he said, "stood side by side the other day, watching the passage of a religious procession.

"The Scotchman was a bitter, dyspeptic individual, and as the procession went by he made a remark highly uncomplimentary to the head of the Church of Rome.

"The Irishman looked at him, smiled, and said:

"'Hoot, mon, so that's yer verdict, is it? Then I say to hell with Harry Lauder!'"